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The Case for AWACS

Beneath the rhetoric and discussion which have accompanied the proposed sale of air defense enhancement equipment, the most basic reason for the sale is that it makes a substantial contribution to the security interests of the United States in a vital part of the world. And it does this without jeopardizing the security of the State of Israel. This is the studied judgment of technical and regional experts within the Administration. It is also the judgment of the President.

This package is not some sort of a political favor we are extending to Saudi Arabia. It is a balanced, effective, much needed contribution to the security of all states in the region, as well as to our own vital interests.

The package consists of conformal fuel tanks for F-15s, AIM-9L Sidewinder Missiles, KC-707 aerial tankers and E3A Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) aircraft. The total cost of the package to Saudi Arabia will be some $8.5 billion.

There are several important factors which led the President to determine that this was the right package for Saudi needs.

1) Security of the Flow of Oil. Loss of Saudi oil for a prolonged period of time would have a disastrous impact on the economy of the West. But Saudi oil facilities are geographically concentrated and are highly vulnerable to air attack, and current Saudi air defense capabilities cannot provide the needed protection. This means that one crucial aspect of our national security and economic health is virtually unprotected.

It is therefore vital to help Saudi Arabia improve its air defense capabilities. The four items in the proposed air defense enhancement package will do a great deal to accomplish this. Each item makes an important contribution to US security.

AIM-9L Sidewinder Missiles give the Saudi Air Force the capability to intercept an attack from all directions, including head-on, greatly improving the chances of shooting down attacking aircraft before they are able to bomb the oil facilities.

Conformal Fuel Tanks and KC-707 Tankers allow Saudi F-15s to be based in western Saudi Arabia so that they are not vulnerable to a surprise enemy attack and so that they can sustain combat over the oil fields.

Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) provides the early warning without which there could be no successful defense of the oil facilities. AWACS will allow the detection of attacking enemy aircraft 150 miles or more from the oil fields, giving enough time to scramble interceptor aircraft to engage

the enemy, thereby reducing the chances that it will reach the oil fields. Without AWACS, this early warning capability will not exist, no matter how many ground radars might be employed.

2) US-Saudi Relations. An important part of the US effort to protect our vital interests in the region is the perception by regional states that the US is prepared to help them meet their legitimate defense requirements. Saudi Arabia sees the air defense package as an indicator of American concern for Saudi security, a perception reinforced by the strong military justification for this sale. We have encouraged Saudi Arabia to play a more vigorous and constructive role in the region, and Saudi Arabia has played such a role over the past several months. This is unlikely to continue if Saudi Arabia does not feel reasonably secure from attacks by regional adversaries.

3) Contribution to US Force Projection. Saudi acquisition of AWACS and associated ground equipment will provide the military infrastructure which will become the nucleus of support for US forces if we are asked to respond in a crisis.

4) US Controls and Influence. The nature of the AWACS is so complex that US contractor personnel will be required to maintain key elements of the system for its entire life. The withdrawal of US support for the Saudi AWACS would quickly result in the system becoming non-operational.

5) Availability of Alternate Aircraft. If the US package is not approved, Saudi Arabia has alternate sources to which it can turn to meet its legitimate defense requirements. The British NIMROD, for example, is comparable to AWACS and available without any US controls. The issue is whether or not the US will have any voice in its use.

6) Security of Technology. The sale of the air defense package does not constitute a high risk of loss of sensitive technology. The AWACS, as it will be sold to Saudi Arabia, was designed in the 1960s; the radar is textbook technology, and the computer is commercially available. The AWACS will not contain certain of the internal components which are restricted to US and NATO use. Only the computer software which is the heart of the system is sensitive.

The source codes which make up the software will not be delivered to NATO or Saudi Arabia; only the magnetic tape program for loading the computer will be provided. Should this fall into Soviet hands, it would require a massive effort and take several years to decipher. At the same time, we could change the software in US AWACS within a matter of days, negating Soviet exploitation.

The Saudis recognize that we are offering to sell them sophisticate technology. They have agreed to security arrangements that go far beyond normal procedures and satisfy stringent US standards.

The sale of the AIM-9L to Saudi Arabia will be protected with the same stringent safeguards. The AIM-9L has already been released to NATO, Japan, Australia and Israel.

7) Security of Israel. This has been one of the least under stood aspects of the sale. The fact is that this sale will not alter the fundamental balance of power in the region. The Presiden is irrevocably committed to ensuring that Israel remains fully capable of defeating any coalition of hostile forces in the region which might be brought to bear against it.

With or without the enhancement items, the Saudi Air Force poses no realistic threat to Israel. Saudi Arabia fully recognizes that Israel's air defense system is exceptionally capable and that under taking missions against Israel would be prohibitively costly.

To provide coverage of Israel, AWACS would have to be deployed along Saudi Arabia's northernmost border, or over Jordan or Syria, dramatically increasing the vulnerability of AWACS to Israeli attack and destruction.

Saudi AWACS is essentially a flying air defense radar. Contrary to some of the myths being argued, AWACS cannot detect ground targets such as tanks, nor can it collect electronic, signal or photographic intelligence.

Without a sophisticated computerized communications network in other Arab countries -- which only the US could provide -- AWACS-derived information would be of virtually no use in a collective Arab attack on Israel.

The proposed air defense enhancement package thus serves our national security interests in four ways:

First, the sale clearly will help the Saudis defend their oil facilities, and therefore our economic health, from air attack.

Second, the sale will help restore our credibility as a reliable security partner in the region.

Third, it will help meet some of our own military needs in the Gulf.

Fourth, because the sale highlights our commitment to Saudi security, it also provides a positive foundation for more extensive US-Saudi cooperation over time.